

# Student Development and On-Campus Living Experience

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## Overview

The development of behavioral psychology and its findings have confirmed the significance of the human being's environment in growth and development. In K-12 education, the significance of the educational environment has been a pointed concern when developing suitable learner-centered, society-centered, and knowledge-centered curricula (Ellis, 2004). In residential higher educational settings, preferences, choices, and decisions of individual students have been differentially focused depending, for example, on the choice of major or reputation of the school; however, the residential setting itself has had continued importance and has had educational implications as well. The question of how to design and to provide campus environments and experiences that are influential to meaningful student growth and development has been one of lasting significance.

In this paper, first, residential hall experiences as an environmental force will be reviewed. Secondly, the results of empirical research on the effects of residence halls on general cognitive growth will be presented. In the latter section of this paper, the influence of the residential experience on a college campus environment will be reviewed.

### *Theories and Research on Residential Hall Experience*

*Residential hall experience as an environmental force.* Those who have experienced higher education have often testified that the college environment offered them opportunities to grow and become mature. Student development through residence life has been an important part of higher education.

However, students in today's higher education are not homogeneous; increased diversity has caused recent student development theories to be expanded into broader areas. At the same time, student development theories have been unable to thoroughly articulate the nature of student development among college students. According to Pascarella and Trenzini (1991), development has been a general movement toward greater differentiation, integration, and complexity in the ways that individuals think, value, and behave. This movement has been orderly, sequential, and hierarchical, passing through higher stages of development that are age related. In the field of higher education, the theories of William Perry (1968), Lawrence Kohlberg (1969), and Arthur Chickering (1969, 1993), have been referred to as the Big Three. However, Rodger's (1990) classification of four primary developmental theories has been more inclusive when organizing the many theories in the field of collegiate experience. They are psychosocial constructs, cognitive-structural theories, typological models, and person-environment interaction models. Developmental theories have dealt with learning styles, identity development, cognitive development, and moral development of women, adults, and multicultural populations (Evans, Forne, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

In order to explore the effects of living in a college residence hall on student development, person-environment theories have been the appropriate theoretical foundation. Pascarella and Trenzini (1991) stated that person-environment theories delve into the environmental conditions and processes that might lead to development. They noted the following: "Essentially, these theories address the influence of the individual's environment on behavior. The environment is acknowledged to have an important influence on development" (p. 47). Person-environment theories have explored the sociological and environmental impact on development. Such theories have tried to explain human behaviors within a social context. They have also attempted to define the environmental factors that facilitate change and development. In other words, person-environment theories have acknowledged the significance that environments have had on the internal processes of development. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), the underlying premise of person-environment

interaction theories has been that schools facilitate shaping the direction and content of student change and growth. Schools “socialize students through a series of experiences in a wide variety of environmental settings that instill in students knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills through the influences of faculty, other students, and other socializing agents” (p. 48).

*Research of residential hall experience on cognitive growth.* One aspect of a college’s environment that has the potential to influence social forces on students has been on-campus residency. Thompson, Samiratedu, and Rafter (1993) examined the influence of on-campus residency on academic performance, academic progress, and retention during students’ first year of enrollment. Their focus was the impact of living on-campus for African-American students at a regional public university (enrollment 12,250). The results of this research supported Blimling’s (1989) finding that residence hall students performed better academically than students living in off-campus housing. This study added that progress and retention were significantly higher for on-campus students regardless of race, gender, or admission type. Other research found that living in an on-campus residential environment was associated with increased persistence and degree completion (Astin, 1993; Wolfe, 1993). Such studies provided correlations, but of course, cannot yield cause and effect results.

Berger (1997) studied the influence of social involvement on persistence. He conducted a path-analytic study. The findings showed that social integration measures had a positive indirect effect on students’ reenrollment for the next academic year, and that student peer relations and institutional commitments had statistically significant and positive net effects on students’ future plans to attend. Three different measures of residence hall living had strong positive and direct effects on student peer relations, particularly their level of interaction. Wolfe’s (1993) study was consistent with what Berger reported.

Living-learning centers (LLCs) have been efforts to integrate spaces for academic classes, study groups, faculty advising, dining, and living in residence halls on campus. They have been more than residence halls. Research in the 1990s (Bliming, 1993, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini,

Pascarella, & Bliming, 1996) indicated consistently that the positive influence of residence halls and their underlying dynamics focused on LLCs. Edwards and McKelfresh (2002) found a statistically significant and positive effect on students living in an LLC, but only for non-White students.

Noting that the empirical studies tended to provide less support for commuter universities than for residential universities, Beekhoven, De Jong, and Van Hout (2004) studied students in different living situations in the Netherlands where there are no campus universities, and there are two types of higher education — universities of professional education and traditional universities — are available for students. A key finding was that students living in rented rooms experienced more personal problems than students who stayed at home. Students living in rooms spent several hours less on their studies, which negatively affected study progress. The weakness of this study was in the sample and the type of data. Further, the study's weaknesses included the difficulty to generalize these findings to other populations since the sample was not representative of an identified population, and there was considerable dependence on the unique characteristics of the sample (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003).

Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, Zusman, Inman, and Desler (1993) considered how living on campus compared to commuting to college influenced students' cognitive growth during college. They tested the hypothesis that living on campus fostered - or at least was related to - cognitive growth by estimating the relative freshman-year gains in reading comprehension, mathematical reasoning, and critical thinking of resident and commuter students. The authors concluded the findings of this study suggest that residing on campus may enhance the impact of college student cognitive and intellectual growth. This study was limited by the single institution's sample of freshman year students.

A meta-analysis was conducted in Blimling's (1999) study in order to examine the influence of college residence halls on students' cognitive development. Blimling integrated and summarized the empirical research from 1966 to 1987 regarding the influence of college residence halls on the academic

performance of undergraduate students in the United States. The 21 studies included in this meta-analysis compared the academic performance of residence hall students with that of students living in a fraternity and sorority, off-campus apartments, or at home. Ten of the studies showed that a residence hall experience did not apparently exert a major influence on students' academic performance when compared to students living at home. The author explained that although literature is rich with examples of special assignment programs in residence halls in which there are positive effects, for residence halls generally, the best assessment may be that they do not exert a major influence on students' academic performance compared to living at home. The meta-analytic results on the comparison between residence hall students and students in fraternity and sorority houses indicated that residence hall students performed slightly better academically, but there could have been many reasons for this. The final analysis compared students living in residence halls with students living in off-campus apartments, showing that students living in residence halls performed academically better than students living in off-campus apartments. One possible explanation, among many, could have been that residence hall students were often wealthier than their stay-at-home counterparts.

Along with the research directly reviewed in this paper, Blimling's (1999) meta-analysis has helped researchers analyze the supposed effects of the college residence experience on students' general cognitive growth and autonomy and locus of control. There have been other important factors associated with living on campus such as persistence and educational attainment (Blimling, 1993); students' social involvement with other students, with faculty members, and with their institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991); autonomy and locus of control (Erwin & Love, 1989); and racial ethnicity attitude (Asada, Swank, Goldey, 2003). However, the focus of this paper was to investigate cognitive growth and its potential connection with motivational theories. As Blimling's meta-analysis demonstrated, research has indicated that the influences of college residence halls on students' cognitive development do exist.

### *Conclusion and Future Research*

Theories and research on college residential hall living have focused in that they are important to student growth in higher education, yet they have been difficult constructs to define theoretically and to operationalize. The reason for this difficulty has been that college campus living involves students' daily issues that are in fact filled with confounding variables in empirical research. Human life is rather messy with no divide between the issues.

A limitation and future challenge for campus living research exists because there are profound variations among residence hall programs and systems at different colleges and universities. Broadening the base of knowledge about the residential experience to different types of educational institutions is inevitable.

Exploring the possible effects of students' voluntary involvement in campus life and the effect of campus living on students would be of interest as a research topic. The word "effects," however, does not imply the proposed research study could determine cause and effect relationships in the sense that a true experimental study could. The growth and development of students who reside on campus is an important educational topic for those who are engaged in higher education.

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